

was it I really wanted to know? That she wouldn't do it to me. That it was all a mistake. That she wasn't crazy. "Tell me what happened, and why."

"I threw him out of a window. In a storm. He didn't believe in flying." I couldn't tell what she was thinking. She seemed utterly alien. "You did."

"And if I hadn't?"

"You were in no danger. The guards were listening outside."

"No." I groped for words. "You gave them the slip. It was some sort of test. You were testing yourself. To see." She had deliberately put me in danger, had taken me to bed in a storm, when her poor mad brain could have made her do anything, when she knew she could not trust herself. Or... maybe she did. Trust for trust, then, she had said, that first night. I had trusted her; perhaps that had given her the ability to trust herself.

"You've made me feel so much." I couldn't describe it to her. She would never understand: she was different, elemental, a being clothed in fire.

...and, with child, the princess Semele asked her mysterious lover to reveal himself in his true nature and form. When Zeus refused, Semele denied him further access to her bed and body. In wrath, Zeus assumed the form of thunder and lightning, and Semele was consumed... .

But I wasn't some idiot peasant, six months pregnant, and Nadia was mortal. She bled, as I did, and felt, and needed. This wasn't impossible.

"Nadia..."

We looked at one another. She was lovely, lovely like a snake, like a twenty-one-foot crocodile, like the edge of the world.

Music burst over us as Crooked Finger pushed open the door. We ignored her. Satisfied that we weren't feeling murderous, she withdrew.

I loved this woman. There had to be a way. "I think you should try therapy," I said, very fast, because I knew she wouldn't like the idea. "And there are drugs you could take, if you thought... when you maybe couldn't really trust yourself. Your trial was more than a year ago. There might be new treatments. Psychiatry is always changing, always moving on." She was shaking her head. "No. Don't make up your mind yet. Do you love me? No, forget I asked that. Don't say anything. I'm going to go back inside now, and serve more beer to more customers. I want you to leave. I want you to think about what I've said, and when you have an answer... when you have an answer..." My throat was closing up. "When you have an answer, let me know." I left her standing there, and stepped back into the smoke and heat of the bar.

**W**hen I got home, she was sitting in my bed. Streetlight turned her skin to gold and copper, and the shadows between her ribs were dark and mysterious as ancient bronze.

"Do you love me?" I asked from the doorway, without turning on the lights.

"I want you."

"That's not good enough," I said, but I was pulling off my clothes.

"Come here." She held me by the hips. "How shall I answer you? I'm crazy, not legally responsible for my actions." Her voice was hot and dark and rough as a cat's tongue. My nipples pebbled. "I'm the only

one who can LAOM dance, because I'm crazy, crazy enough to believe I can fly, that I can do it." She kissed the place three inches above my navel, where all the nerves in the torso come together. "Everyone else knows it can't be done, so they don't do it." She kissed lower. "I'm mad enough to believe in myself, to believe that it can be done. Lie down." I did. "So I do it. Like an idiot savant. No one knows how I do it, but I do."

She lay down beside me and began rocking her palm on my belly. She spoke into my open mouth. "And you want me to go to some shrink and be cured of what it is that makes me believe I can fly, that makes me free. Open your legs." She started inside my knees and stroked my thighs gently, all the way up, cradled my buttocks in one hand. Her eyes were like holes. "I won't," she said.

Then she wrapped herself around me like a python.

I woke early, not long after dawn. She was sleeping on her stomach, head turned to the right, one leg bent at the knee, arms above her head, lips parted: perfect, right down to her eyelashes and fingernails and the downy hairs in the small of her back.

I won't, she had said. And she wouldn't.

With her eyes closed, I could forget that she'd killed someone, once. I was willing to take the chance. I wanted to rub her feet when they ached and listen while she complained about the weather; I wanted to see her laugh when I presented her with seventeen brightly-wrapped presents for her next birthday; I wanted to stand in line with her at K-Mart to buy cheap shirts, and work out who owed what on the phone bill.

She sighed and turned her head to the left. Where she had been lying on it, her hair was flat and dark. I wanted to run my fingers through it. Instead, I slid quietly from the bed, pulled on some clothes and wrote a note to stick on the TV screen: *Gone shopping to make you a breakfast that'll put the nectar of the gods to shame.*

**I** took my time at the market. For the first time, I enjoyed sifting oatbran through my fingers, fascinated by its cream and gold flow, its smell of dust and biscuit. The rice flour was more gritty, and reminded me of almonds. While I waited for the orange honey to fold, heavy and slow, into my container, I imagined sitting outside in some Florida orchard with Nadia, listening to bees hum through the blossom.

I plumped each loaf of bread to find the freshest; picked up each piece of fruit individually, checking for that perfect, unblemished, ripe-to-bursting skin before I put it carefully in my basket. I even chose the eggs one by one.

I walked back through the early morning sunshine, then up the five flights of steps full of the marvel of the breakfast I would conjure from my paper sack: fruit salad, bran and banana muffins, eggs, toast...

The apartment door was open. The sticky note was gone. Nadia was gone. A strange woman was wiping down the light switches and door handles, and Crooked Finger was sitting on the edge of the bed, tapping something against her thigh. The laserdisk.

"There were three, I think – but they shouldn't have got close."

"Survivalists," said one of the detectives. "They're trained, and they probably knew the territory. They were probably after the gun, the night-sight and the flak-jacket rather than the money-belt, but of course they took that too. You'd think you'd be safe inside the city limits, but nobody is – not these days."

"It wasn't complacency," said Andrews. Carmichael didn't doubt it for a second. "Doc, I need to take a couple of the men..."

"That wouldn't be a good idea," said the second detective swiftly.

"No," said Carmichael, "I don't suppose it would. I'm sorry, sergeant, but I can't do that. We don't have the time. We have to go back east tonight."

Andrews looked genuinely surprised. "But, Doc..." he protested. He was too good a man to say anything about the girl in front of the local men, but his eyes spoke volumes.

"I'm sorry," said Carmichael again, before turning to the policemen. He assured them that there'd be no problems, that it would all be left to them – but that Washington would be in touch again if they couldn't make progress. He added a remark to the effect that if civil society really had broken down to the extent that was apparent, it might be time to consider martial law. The cops' grins turned into half-scowls as they caught his implications, but they left without starting any argument.

"It's okay," said Carmichael, raising his hand as Andrews opened his mouth to speak. "I'll take the responsibility for the equipment and the money. I'll tell them that I recklessly ordered you into a dangerous situation against your better judgment, and that I told Kravitz to stay behind, leaving you without back-up. Your superiors will be only too happy to blame it all on some dumb-ass scientist."

Andrews looked uncertain.

"I don't want the local police asking too many questions," Carmichael added. "I don't want them to know that I found the girl. She's scared of the people who burned down the labs, and she doesn't trust the police. I can't blame her."

"You saw her?" Andrews seemed surprised.

Carmichael nodded. "I looked for you outside," he lied, "but I couldn't hang around to search the bushes. Anyhow, I saw the girl again – and two of the other people who worked up at the labs. I got a full enough account of what was going on – full enough to make up into a passable report. That's all we're here for. Given the way things are around here, I'd like to get back home as soon as humanly possible – know what I mean?"

The sergeant still looked uncertain, but he nodded again. He felt the back of his head, where he'd been hit. "Feels like enemy territory," he said. "I mean, this is the USA, right? We're supposed to be on the same fucking side."

"Things are falling apart," said Carmichael sympathetically. "So many people are dying that the infrastructure is collapsing. It's not safe to drink the tap-water, and they can't even keep the TV networks going. Sheer cultural inertia is all that's holding the Union in place, and the barbarians are at the gates, looting, pillaging and burning. The survivalists might

